Opinion

Guest Voices



New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, right, welcomes Bishop Ronald Hicks during a news conference at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dec.18. in New York. Pope Leo has appointed Hicks archbishop of New York. (AP/Ryan Murphy)



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Dec. 15 began a most unusual week for the U.S. Catholic Church. A Spanish publication, Religión Digital, reported late on that day that Pope Leo XIV would appoint Bishop Ronald Hicks of Joliet, Illinois, to succeed Cardinal Timothy Dolan as archbishop of New York. The appointment, the story said, was expected the next day. In fact, two more days would pass before the appointment finally came, as Catholics in the United States speculated wildly.

Bishop appointments rarely leak. Many new bishops are named each month around the world. Confidentiality is kept with remarkable effectiveness, given that for each appointment the process is lengthy and consultative, and a lot of people know which candidates are being vetted. It works in part because everyone's participation in the process is constrained by what is called a pontifical secret: To leak word is a grave sin for someone, and it can incur penalties under canon law.

It is shocking that Hicks' appointment was leaked, but it also raised the fascinating question of why it was leaked at all.

As we waited to learn whether the rumor was true, it seemed at least possible that Hicks' appointment was leaked as an attempt to derail it and embarrass Cardinal Blase Cupich, the archbishop of Chicago. Cupich is the most influential American on the Vatican committee that nominates bishops for the pope's approval, the Dicastery for Bishops. For two years, Cupich worked closely on selecting the church's new generation of leaders with Cardinal Robert Prevost, who, until he became Pope

Leo XIV, was the head of the dicastery. Hicks is a protégé of Cupich.

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Earlier this fall, several U.S. bishops made a bold move to embarrass Cupich after he announced he would honor Sen. Dick Durbin, who is Catholic, for his lifetime of work on U.S. immigration policy. The bishops who objected pointed out that Durbin is also pro-choice, and that honoring him would send the wrong message. Leo intervened personally, seeming to take Cupich's side, but by that time Durbin had declined the honor.

Were Cupich's opponents at it again, leaking word of the New York appointment?

Some more history may be helpful. In their 2010 vote for president of their conference, the U.S. bishops broke with tradition and skipped over their vice president, the moderate Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Arizona, instead electing Dolan, who was seen as more conservative. This ugly flex of brute power set the bishops on their 15-year-long campaign to stand athwart the broader American culture, and, as it turned out, the coming direction of the church. Francis was elected pope barely two years later, and most of the U.S. bishops remained out of step with him until he died.



Clergy attend the funeral of Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, April 26. (AP/Markus Schreiber, File)

Playing havoc with Leo's appointment to replace Dolan — the last active cardinal archbishop created by Pope Benedict XVI — looks like a disruptive move by those who realize that the U.S. church is at last aligning with Francis' and Leo's priorities.

In an interview with NBC News after Hicks' appointment, Cupich said his former auxiliary bishop would bring a different style to New York, predicting Hicks will prioritize being a pastor, not a media figure, in line with Francis' vision of ministry. Without saying it, Cupich was declaring the end of an era, a time characterized by culture wars and confrontation.

Hardly the worst of the culture warrior bishops, Dolan was nevertheless a consistent one. From Obama-era religious liberty struggles and the Fortnight for Freedom campaign begun under Dolan's leadership of the USCCB to his obsequious flattery of President Donald Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic and his membership on Trump's religious liberty commission to his panegyric on Charlie Kirk, Dolan can't be

said to have soothed division or promoted peace, even as Francis specifically asked the U.S. bishops to seek "unity," "reconcil[e] differences" and promote a church "in which no division dwells."

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There is one more reason to think something is happening behind the scenes. All Catholic bishops are required by canon law to submit their resignations on their 75th birthdays, after which the pope accepts at a time of his choosing. Lately, bishops have been serving longer and longer. Boston's Cardinal Seán O'Malley stayed in his seat until 80. Cupich is coming up on 77. A bishop recently joked with me that "78 is the new 75." Dolan has been 75 for only 10 months, and we've heard no reports of any unusual health problems.

Why was the story leaked? We probably never will know. Given that the effect of the leak was to transform Dolan's replacement from a less sensational one-day story into a one-week story, it may have come from either side. If that was the intention, it was as brutal as what was done to Kicanas in 2010. That sort of retribution serves no one. Whatever the reason, our attention needs to look past all that and fall on the meaning of this moment of transition in the light of history.

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The Catholic Church in the U.S. faces extraordinary challenges — declining Mass attendance, declining vocations to the priesthood, the vast scale and ramifications of financial settlements for clerical sex abuse. Hicks will be on the front line of many of these challenges. But there are other challenges too. They face everyone in the church.

The greatest of those challenges is to end the sense among Catholics that one "side" is winning or losing. Dividers have dominated the church for too long. We have spawned a culture of online Catholic influencerism that has poisoned the church, twisted it into two opposing camps locked in a seemingly endless contest that does

little to advance the reign of God but raises a lot of money and exerts remarkable political influence. That was not what Francis wanted. We have good reasons to think it is not what Leo, Cupich or Hicks wants, either.

But more Catholics must want it. They must stop listening to those who claim to speak for the church, but who only divide it. It would be better to pay heed to the church's pastors whose greatest ambition is to accompany and serve their people.

We have more and more of those bishops now. Hicks is one of them. Much success to him.